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Race on *The Wire*: a metacritical account

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Abstract

This article draws on critical responses to *The Wire* as a way of reflecting on how race is reproduced. It focuses on how calls for better stories and images on television are not reconciled with the ontological distinction between representation and reality and the fact that there is no unitary racialised subject to represent and looks at how a narrow set of racialised relations are invoked to explain interpretations of black culture despite a more complex set of viewing positions and practices. It argues that rather than the erasure of race becoming more prevalent, normative racialised assumptions and narrow conceptions of subject and viewing positions continue to inflect commentary about popular culture. It also proposes that the achievement and cultural value of *The Wire* exemplifies a shift in the way stories are constructed in the contemporary media landscape from linear, morally prescriptive narratives to complex, morally ambiguous accounts of social worlds. In doing so, the politics of representation and thus how appetites for complex narratives and characters are being attended to by shows like *The Wire* become more visible without invoking race as the final arbiter of authentic storytelling.

Keywords: representation; racialisation; post-race; television.

Introduction

In this article I problematise the way in which explanations of *The Wire's* gritty authenticity is symptomatic of an ongoing commitment to race and reinforces race as a category 'out there' in the world by focusing on two issues. The first concerns the validation of fictional drama featuring black people (in particular) through reference to an authentic unitary blackness and raced-bodies and the second, is the tendency to assume a narrow set of interpretive relations that specify white viewers of black subjects. To move beyond the impasse of race-thinking that these issues exemplify, this article emphasises narrative complexity and moral ambiguity as productive measures to destabilise cultural representations of race.

Two common focal points of critique and praise emerge from academic commentary about *The Wire*[1]. The first is the extent to which it either challenges or reproduces stereotypical racial representations (Ault 2013; Bramall and Pitcher 2012; Brock 2009; Fraley 2009; McDougall 2010; Sharma 2011). Second, the five seasons of the show – each of which brings a different social institution into focus (the drug trade, the port, city bureaucracy and politics, schools and the print media) – are not only thought to offer a convincing account of a number of issues such as poverty, social inequality and the decline of social institutions; the manner in which they do so is also believed to constitute sociological analysis. Within this commentary, the extent to which the show offers an authentic portrait of Baltimore – and its largely African-American inhabitants – is considered to be important as it relates to the credibility of the complex narrative and the analysis that is integrated throughout.

The dominant explanations for the show's authenticity within this commentary reference its production, distribution or reception. Some accounts point to the creators of the show (David

Simon and Edward Burns) and the way in which they have drawn on their own critical knowledge of Baltimore through their experiences as newspaper journalist working for the *Baltimore Sun* and alongside the police force (Simon) and as schoolteacher and former Police Officer (Burns) (see for example, Penfold-Mounce, Beer and Burrows 2011). Others build on this by highlighting that Simon, Burns and the rest of the production team, had fewer creative and commercial restrictions placed on them enabling the show to develop in an uncompromising way, because it was made by and distributed (initially) through Home Box Office (HBO)[2] (Mittell 2012). This means that rather than having to amass large audiences and secure advertising revenue, as a premium subscription channel, HBO focus on pleasing its subscribers who expect more challenging content. Second, the large numbers of African-American and black British actors, including some who have had similar experiences as those depicted in the show, as well as local Baltimore residents whose lives have been drawn on within the narrative, have also been identified as key determinants of its authenticity and meaning (Penfold-Mounce, Beer and Burrows 2011). Finally, some commentary suggest that its authentic value is produced by white liberal desire for either progressive or stereotypical representations of blackness and that like rap music, the show is a site of cultural tourism (Bramall and Pitcher 2012; McDougall 2010; McNeill 2009). The latter two types of explanation will be the main focus here.

On the one hand, having a credible story that enables critical reflection of society and in this case, a society constituted by poverty, inequality and flailing social institutions is unproblematic. Assessing the extent to which depictions of African-Americans are accurate or realistic is of a different order altogether and raises questions about the extent to which the conceptual status of race figures within such commentary and the mode of representation being deployed. This is important given the more recent theoretical discussions about race that consider the feasibility of its erasure – in other words, post-race debates and the attempt

(see for instance, Gilroy 1998; Nayak 2006; St Louis 2002) to break out of the impasse of race-thinking whereby race is acknowledged as a social construction – and thus, understood as "an arbitrary sign used to divide up the human population, with no distinguishing genetic differences of any consequence" (Nayak 2006: 415) – on the one hand, and yet, is reified by wittingly or unwittingly imparting ontological value to it. Research scholarship that takes a social constructionist perspective tends to assume race as produced through social process, which is fluid, flexible and continually modified, rather than assuming the existence of raced-objects whereby individuals embody a fixed set of racial properties that have social outcomes. However, within the context of executing social research, which invariably involves human bodies, there is often a conflation between the process of becoming marked through and by race and knowing race as an object, i.e. through 'raced' respondents. Invariably, although race is understood to come into being through discursive and institutional practices therefore, often such practices are substantiated through research by "corporeal certainty" (Nayak 2006: 416).

This article examines the racially reproductive propensities and restrictive representative relations within the commentary about *The Wire* by revisiting Hall's (1992) defining statement about the shifting symbolic relations of representation and the 'end of the essential black subject'. It argues that rather than the erasure of race becoming more prevalent, normative racialised assumptions and narrow conceptions of subject and viewing positions continue to inflect commentary about popular culture. It also proposes that the achievement and cultural value of *The Wire* exemplifies a shift in the way stories are constructed in the contemporary media landscape from linear, morally prescriptive narratives to complex, morally ambiguous accounts of social worlds. In doing so, the politics of representation and thus how appetites for complex narratives and characters are being attended to by shows like

The Wire become more visible without invoking race as the final arbiter of authentic story-telling.

Modes of race and representation: the legacy of Stuart Hall

What do calls for better, more convincing or authentic representations of the social world and its people mean within a context of widespread acceptance that race, in and of itself, is a social construction? Ideas about race – as knowable categories that exist 'out there in the world' – continue to be invoked as a way of determining whether stories and characters on our screens resemble real life even though race is unable to bring together the plurality of experience, multiple social affinities and negotiated political allegiances that people have. This section frames the conflation of discursive processes with raced entities and the explanatory power of race itself within the context of calls for better or more accurate cultural representations by revisiting Hall's eponymous contribution to earlier debates about race and representation, which emerged as a critical reflection on the political conundrum shaping black British artistic and cultural practice in the late 1980s.

Hall expressed the key shift in the formation of black subjectivity in Britain as changing from a culturally hegemonic understanding of black experience as singular and unifying to the recognition of its political and cultural constructedness and of "the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experiences of black subjects" (Hall 1992: 254). The latter moment is encapsulated in his now famous phrase – 'the end of the (innocent) essential black subject'. Hall made an important connection between this shift and dominant modes of representation, observing that the notion of a realistic mimetic style of

representation – that cultural forms reflect the real world outside and that there was an authentic black subject to represent – should be discarded. Instead, a postmodern approach was proposed that acknowledges black as a "discursively produced category constructed through representation" (Proctor 2004: 127). It follows that there are no aesthetic or political guarantees within black and other racial identities and furthermore, that it makes little sense to use authenticity as a criterion to judge artistic and cultural production. Acknowledgement of the paradigm shift provided a discursive benchmark within academic debates about representation in the UK ever since.

Indeed, rethinking the politics of identity and the dynamics of race and representation in the 1980s along the lines suggested by Stuart Hall and other theorists encouraged a shift from perceiving racial stereotypes as negative or wrong – previously considered to be a necessary step in challenging racist cultural practice – to the recognition that there were no objective, unitary racial groups 'out there' to represent (Malik 2002). Although there are indications that the images of ethnic and racial difference in mainstream television have in the main shifted away from crude racist stereotypes, particularly if one considers previous shows such as *The Black and White Minstrel Show* and *Mind Your Language*[3], responsibility for the narrow range and/or racist depictions of ethnic minorities – for instance, black people as 'troublemaker, entertainer and dependant' and South Asians as 'shopkeepers, terrorists or taxi-drivers' (Malik 2002; Ross 1996) – within British and American television drama in particular continues to be attributed to the fact that key aspects of television production, both in the UK and US, are believed to be controlled by white dominated media organisations and the assumption that the average television viewer – and what is normal per se – is white. It is unclear therefore how the general call for greater ethnic diversity amongst cultural producers and managers today is reconciled to how the dynamics of representation are understood and practised in light of Hall's work on the constitutive role that representation plays in

constructing racialised categories. Rather than seeing better access to and participation within cultural production by ethnically diverse creative workers as a critical step towards progressive representation in and of itself, often the demand for wider participation and access is conflated with a desire for better more accurate images and stories. The former does not provide any guarantees of the latter and importantly, the latter is not a straightforward by-product of the former. Collapsing the two tends to reaffirm ideas of belonging and authenticity that describe absolutist and racist notions of culture

Reading the range of accounts about *The Wire* within the context of the paradigm shift in theorising relations of representation is a reminder of how influential Hall's analysis has been. However, within some of these accounts, there is not only a reliance on the notion of authenticity (or truth), legitimation of the show is sought through apparently knowable (raced) entities that exist in the world to confirm or disavow the show's truth or accuracy[4]. Such accounts compromise the relational and constructed nature of social categories and in so doing, demonstrate the ongoing appeal of race, as a singular, unified and homogeneous category that corresponds to knowable entities out there in the world (see also Haynes 2013). Thus, for anyone grappling with ways to challenge the conditions of the everyday discursive formation of race in order to minimise its symbolic and material effects, Hall's work is as necessary as ever. The remainder of the article explores different types of commentary about *The Wire* in light of these issues.

The dismantling of race positionality

Some of the critical commentary about *The Wire* suggests that the show tries to avoid presenting 'raced' subjects as fulfilling a set of biologically determined behaviours and attitudes within stereotypical roles whilst attending to the structuring effects of racism and poverty within the narrative. Fraley (2009) for instance argues from the position that television should not be burdened by "an eternal search for authentic representations or accurate reflections" and further suggests *The Wire* is an exemplar of how television can contest racial hegemony by getting beyond "constructed dichotomies and revealing the intersection and interdependence of class, race, and gender". Bramall and Pitcher (2012: 86) further suggest that the show not only defies the tried and tested formula of a regime of representation centred around race, but that it does so by rejecting the "compulsory heterosexuality and casual homophobia" that defines the normal repertoire of urban blackness on US television. However, whilst such commentary about representation in *The Wire* reiterates the significance of intersectionality and the complexity of individual social position, which in particular affirms the diversity and differentiated nature of blackness, a more significant aspect to emphasise is the manner in which the idea of race is knowingly undermined.

Within some iconic representations in contemporary cultural forms the stable configurations of race boundaries are knowingly transgressed, affirmed and parodied from the inside. The best example of this is demonstrated by the comedic caricature that is Ali G created by Sacha Baron Cohen (see Gilroy 2002; Nayak 2006; Younge 2000). The numerous attempts by viewers to determine whether for instance "Ali G is a white Jew pretending to be black, a white Jew pretending to be a white pretending to be black, a white Jew pretending to be an Asian pretending to be black" (Gilroy 2002) illustrates the impossibility of race logic, whilst simultaneously demonstrating how distorting race categories invokes fear, anxiety and hatred. It is possible therefore viewers are laughing at Ali G for completely different reasons: some

are laughing because they think he is ridiculing white people who "overdo their impression of black youth culture" and others may be laughing at what they believe is an interpretation of black men as "stupid, sexist, drug-taking layabouts" (Younge 2000: 3). The fact that either view is possible and that there is no definitive description of Ali G is instructive for thinking about how the idea of race and racial hierarchies are believed to be destabilised within the context of the commentary of *The Wire* in other ways[5]

Sharma (2011) for instance observes that due to the significant presence of African-American characters in *The Wire*, "blackness is the norm" and whiteness is made strange and concludes that this dimension of the politics of representation is progressive. McNeil (2009) also highlights the significance of the show's critical treatment of whiteness, particularly in the second season, and points to how both 'soulless white suits' are castigated for the destruction of working class Baltimore because of their desire for business developments within the docklands area and to the hopelessness portrayed through young, white working class males, who copy the behaviour and style of black males. McNeil identifies how critiques of the first version of whiteness is contextualised within the show's broader analysis of the neoliberal agenda as hastening the city's ruin, whilst in the second case, the white co-option of the black vernacular of street-dealers is undermined through dialogue by both black and white drug dealers and police. Both versions of whiteness are depicted as failing to see that their desires and lifestyle choices are inherently short-term and short-lived.

This tranche of the commentary does not rely on notions of racial authenticity to assess the credibility of show. Instead, it draws attention to how characters in *The Wire* are considered to be portrayals of contingent and constructed racialised subjectivities and highlight that cultural identities are incomplete; they are always in the process of 'becoming' and thus, not expected to display a set of social attitudes and cultural values that are tied to normative ideas of race.

The Wire: an unrealistic, stereotypical account

In other commentary, characters are described as racist stereotypes and the show is criticised for being unrealistic in its portrayal of black experience and Baltimore itself – that the show fails to 'tell it how it really is'. Thus, questions about the authenticity and accuracy of the depiction of African-Americans, black motherhood and Baltimore itself are raised in a large number of the published commentaries and online discussions and some further suggest that the show has an overly pessimistic tone. For example, Dreier and Atlas (2012: 132) suggest that the show is unrealistic and that the error of the show's creators (David Simon and Edward Burns) was their determination to expose the problems of Baltimore, and that in so doing, they "provided viewers with an unrealistically negative picture of the inner city". Moreover, Anderson (cited in Parker 2010: 549) whilst praising the show's "powerful appearance of reality" and authentic portrayal of the codes of the street, suggests that it is an exaggeration and that the "bottom-line cynicism" of the show is at odds with his own perception of real life. Additionally, we are told repeatedly through critical commentary that the show's authenticity, particularly regarding its depiction of black identities and experience, is thought to be enhanced by the fact that a number of characters and storylines in the show are based on real people and their experiences, that a number of its actors share the experiences of characters depicted in the show and/or are the same 'real-life' people that the characters are derived from. Whilst it is reasonable to observe that all of this lends credibility to the show's fictional narrative enabling viewers to critically reflect on the social world they inhabit; it does not provide unmediated access to the reality of Baltimore life or prove that the

show depicts the true nature of the social world because of the participation and depiction of black people.

Elsewhere, representations of black motherhood are considered to be particularly problematic. Although Ault (2013: 388) acknowledges that there are some exceptional female characters in the show (such as Kima and Snoop) she suggests that less effort has been made to challenge and transcend stereotypes about black motherhood and concludes that ultimately, this reflects existing public discourse about 'black welfare queens'. This analysis is made on the basis that compared to almost all other groups that are depicted, poor black mothers are reduced to reproduced stereotypes of "pathological non-normativity" and therefore as "irresponsible, irrational, and emasculating". Reading the text in this way (or any other way for that matter) is not the issue here. Instead, what matters is the basis upon which 'improvements' to the representations of this subset of black female characters can be argued. Are the depictions of black women and men and Baltimore itself in *The Wire* to be condemned for being an exaggeration, too realistic or not realistic enough? Each criticism is potentially at odds against the other and is a reminder of the degree of confusion that surrounds criticism of stereotypes (see Pickering 2001: 15). All representations are inadequate in their quest to represent if what is understood by this is that such portrayals capture the truth or essence of an entire social category.

The reality evoked within the desire for less bleak or more realistic or better representation of black people, male or female, gay or straight, working or middle class, as well as their many intersections, is not easy to define. Whatever the dominant interpretation of black mothers or black experience is or should be within popular culture, the question worth considering is whether other interpretations are valid or simply wrong and thus, racist (see Brooker 2001 for an interesting exploration of his experiences of such issues)? Given that the notion of 'black'

is no longer a unifying concept or a guarantee of political solidarity, as it is understood as fragmented, contingent and intersecting with numerous forms of cultural difference, how can it be expected to bring together the range of experience, affinities and political solidarities that people have? Thus, within the politics of representation, alternative images that are derived from what is assumed to be 'more accurate information' – for instance about black mothers – misses the point and are only ever likely to be partially satisfactory.

Rather than pursuing racial authenticity in representation particularly as a way of challenging racism, examining the extent to which moral ambiguity is evinced through narrative and character is arguably important for dismantling race; for when it is deployed as a sign with arbitrary moral value, traditional racial hierarchies are undermined. Gilroy (2001) makes a similar point when he argues that more effective action can be taken against racial hierarchies when respect for the idea of race itself is eliminated and that this is the most persuasive card (in political and ethical terms) to play. Avoiding the dualistic – good/bad, white/black and so on – framing of ethnic groups can suggest that there are no intrinsic guarantees that can be read off easily through individual characters or stories and thus no particular social group is likely to be interpreted as having a monopoly on power or virtue. Following this line of reasoning, it is notable that within some of the published commentary, the fact that a straightforward moral position is not explicitly adopted through the narrative and characterisation is believed to threaten the credibility of the show. For this reason, the show is perceived as an inauthentic account of poverty, social inequality and race.

The Wire and the racialised moral map

Within the 'negative' portrait of Baltimore, Dreier and Atlas (2012: 135) argue that the show ignores the black working class and that the majority of African-Americans living in Baltimore's urban areas are portrayed as "dangerous criminals, drug addicts, welfare recipients – an unemployed underclass – culturally damaged, a class of people whose behaviour and values separate them from respectable society". Similarly, Anderson suggests that the decent folk are not visible in the show and that "[e]ven in the worst drug-infested projects, there are many, many God-fearing, churchgoing, brave people who set themselves against the gangs and the addicts, often with remarkable heroism" (cited in Parker 2010: 549). There is an implication from such comments that the show's creators have failed as they have not challenged racialised regimes of representation by substituting negative images of black criminals and drug addicts with more positive images. However, it is unclear then how the senior detectives, police, journalists, council members and politicians that are African-American and who feature routinely in the show are believed to be categorised in terms of class and 'respectability' in this reading. Furthermore, how do those – both white and black – who occupy 'respectable' professions but that do not conform to the moral codes assumed to be embodied by such roles, fit within this reading? Such depictions undermine any straightforward mapping of the show's racialised characterisation as good/bad and positive/negative onto white/black people. The critical commentary cited above suggests that there is a narrow subset of social types that act in a morally acceptable manner and that moral decency is typically embodied and expressed through a particular social role or indeed by individuals that are God-fearing, church-going people living 'wholly decent' lives. Drug addicts or dangerous criminals are therefore unable to have any moral sensibilities.

In contrast, Fraley (2009) argues that one of the strengths of the show is that moral codes are not determined a priori by social role as drug addict or gangster or, more importantly, their cultural identities as black males in this case. In other words, rather than fixing characters

through a prescriptive set of moral absolutes imagined through narrowly construed social roles (e.g. drug addict, gangster, lawyer, politician) that are often fulfilling racial stereotypes as well, morality is determined by awareness of and reaction to responsibilities to themselves and others within different contexts and social interactions. Virtue, bravery and social responsibility within this reading can be expressed by a broad range of social types in diverse settings, including areas of social deprivation, and in this way moral codes are not reduced to racial stereotype.

In contrast to the type of commentary about moral decency evinced through Anderson and Drier and Atlas, the latter interpretation of moral responsibility constructed through *The Wire's* narrative can be understood in light of a major theme running through Bauman's (1993) *Postmodern Ethics*. Morality is conceived in this work as responsibility to others, as opposed to the conception of morality as obedience to moral rules. This kind of shift in orientation is not to suggest that moral concerns are abandoned, rather that there is a rejection of the typical way of dealing with moral issues through appeals to theoretically driven moral absolutes or by deploying strict normative regulations through political means to tackle moral challenges effectively. Bauman's (1993) view that society is established through the practices and competency of its individual members is reflected in the way some commentary, including that referred to above, suggests that *The Wire* portrays a wide range of practices and levels of competency of individuals within a range of social contexts and established institutions that are not fulfilling any racial stereotype associated with social roles. In doing so, *The Wire* is thus alternatively read as showing the moral and political ideals of the American dream in decline, revealing the moribund effort of Baltimore's social and political institutions that are purportedly meant to deliver a more meritocratic society. Moreover, commentary such as Fraley's above suggests that individuals experience the brunt of such

institutional failings, assume moral responsibility and strive to make some changes or correct some imbalance, even if their method of doing so is flawed and as yet, untried and untested.

Moral complexity can also be associated with the more ambiguous storytelling that is believed to be characteristic of the wider television trend associated with the breaking down of the boundary between serialised and episodic dramas with the use of longer story arcs to narrate serial type dramas (Mittell 2012). Given that *The Wire* was originally produced through the HBO network, also suggests less concern for making a story that appeals to a particular advertising revenue stream – to sell a particular consumer product (Mittell 2012). Moreover television's status has also been reconsidered within the contemporary media environment and it is now defined through discourses of legitimation, where as a medium, television is experiencing a significant shift in its aesthetic value (Newman and Levine 2012) and is feted for producing a number of serialised dramas that are extending the boundaries of narrative complexity. Moving beyond simple linear plots, suggests less reliance on cultural codes that are more immediately and widely accessible which typically involves the use of racial and gendered stereotypes to convey meaning. As such, shows like *The Wire* are believed to be less dependent on racial stereotypes that map onto definitive moral evaluations to tell their stories.

This is where I think the most instructive achievement of television drama lies – by not providing a familiar prescriptive racialised moral mapping through the story and characters a more complex analysis of social power can unfold. Indeed, social scientists have shown considerable interest in *The Wire* because it is believed to constitute a form of social analysis (Atkinson and Beer 2010; Bramall and Pitcher 2012; Penfold-Mounce, Beer and Burrows 2011; Wood 2014). In order for the blurred lines between good/bad, black/white, moral/corrupt to be effective, their disruption is believed – in some commentary – to be conveyed convincingly through the show's moral complexity, whereby individual behaviours

and attitudes are not explained through a pathologisation of racialised cultures and the convenient shorthand of stereotypes. This is not to suggest that race will not be reworked and resignified in other ways (see also Haynes 2013; Pitcher 2014[6]), it is likely that racialisation will occur within complex moral accounts of the social world too, but with a less pronounced hierarchy of virtue perhaps it may just become more ordinary.

Watching the detectives: recasting relations of representation

The second issue to emerge from analysis of the commentary is the extent to which explanations of the conditions for the dominant interpretation of the show, particularly for those who believe the show offers a break with traditional stereotypes or their (partial) reproduction, reproduce a narrow racialised set of representational relations and limit the way in which viewing practices are understood in the new media landscape. Within some academic commentary about the show it is suggested that the favourable reviews of its depiction of race can largely be explained by looking at its progressive white liberal audience and/or the creators of the show – also white liberals. Turning a reflexive lens onto the academic commentary about the show, Bramall and Pitcher (2012: 87) suggest that the challenges to dominant regimes of representation offered by *The Wire* are in fact a result of "the circuit of audience desire and gratification". The sociologically gratifying nature of the characterisation is said to fulfil its liberal audience's need to challenge racist depictions within television and popular culture more broadly. The explanation for Omar therefore is not that he is a realistic figure but rather, for those who are concerned about problematic media representation, Omar embodies the yearning for the refutation of stereotypes through good representation – he can be better understood as "a bourgeois fantasy of urban blackness"

which provides "a mechanism for the white middle classes to feel at home in poor black Baltimore" (Bramall and Pitcher 2012: 87).

Whilst their reading is provocative within the context of the academic homage paid to the show, the focus is on how black characterisation fulfils the need to refute stereotypes and nothing explicit is said about how this same white liberal audience critically engages with representations of white people throughout the show. Although attributing progressive representations of black people to white liberal desire is one of many possible sets of relations – the authors are not making an exclusive claim in this regard – it does inadvertently reproduce a familiarly narrow formation of interpretative 'white-black' relations. The price to pay for exploring and recognising the "diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experiences of black subjects" (Hall 1992: 254) appears to be 'the diversity of other subjective positions'.

Other authors invoke a 'white pathologising' viewer for the show. Ault (2013: 397; 388) for instance suggests that the aforementioned stereotypes of "black welfare queens" and "emasculating black women" are those its white affluent audience are comfortable with and highlights HBO's concern with authenticity as lending support to white liberals' views about black maternal pathology. Another type of commentary emphasises a 'white fetishising' audience for the show that is based on the presumption of a longstanding fascination with black people and culture. It is suggested by Walters (2008) that "[i]deas of race and class tourism" are woven through much of the online commentary on microsites provided by *The Guardian* and HBO itself, suggesting more of a voyeuristic quality to the interest in the show. Citing another online blog, Walters also compares how white audiences are drawn to *The Wire* in the same way they are drawn to hip-hop because they "love the fantasy of Black thug life". Another example is Christian Lander's blog called 'Stuff that White People Like'; summarising the content of this post, McNeil (2009) describes how *The Wire* "purportedly

fulfils a need for gritty realism and interracial brotherhood among folks who are also fans of gentrification". Again, such commentary frames the interpretation through a set of white-black relations where white viewers indulge their fear and fantasy of blackness through images of black thugs.

Being reflexive about the representational practice in *The Wire* and questioning whether "'good' cultural politics" is the "straightforward and unambiguous outcome of 'good' representation" (Bramall and Pitcher 2012: 87) is instructive – especially in the way that Bramall and Pitcher query what might lie beyond the desire for the transgressive black characters in the show such as Omar – were it not for the fact that in so doing, we end up in familiar territory where even the 'right-on' images of black people and experience are framed within the context of a 'white' viewing position. Although the claims being made in their reading of the show are not exclusive – they too would be open to other readings – elaborating upon black representations by narrowly invoking a particularly familiar white viewing position means that the imagery and narrative of *The Wire* is fixed in the same set of relations that fantasise, fetishise or pathologise black experience. Once any reading or form of consumption is labelled or configured as 'white' in public discourse, it tends to be associated with negative sociocultural forms of identification such as misplaced fear or inappropriate desire – reproducing what appears to be the only possible relationship that 'white people' can have to 'black culture'. A better understanding of what would constitute good cultural politics and thus, the extent to which the representations generated by white liberal desire outlined above differs from other possible progressive readings, are important issues to address. In doing so, it may then be possible to move beyond the limited set of racial relations that tends to restrict white consumption of black images and cultural forms (such as hip hop) more generally to a narrow ahistorical – and often racist – formation and begin to

reflect the potentially complicated more fluid politics of representation that might exist in today's cultural landscape.

The assumption of a white liberal audience stems from the show's original distribution through HBO; as a premium subscription cable television network its US audience is presumed to possess substantial levels of cultural and economic capital. However, this ignores the potentially wider constituency of ethnically diverse viewers who adopt other means of access and patterns of viewing. To support an alternative conceptual framing of representative relations in *The Wire*, viewing positions and meaning-making need to be understood in light of the shift in the cultural and technological conditions shaping the mode of distribution and reception of television – from mass audience to the fragmented, mobile and interactive audience. Moving away from the notion that an audience can be reduced to discrete social categories, first it needs to be acknowledged that *The Wire's* audience is not only made up of those who watched it within the parameters of its original real-time broadcasting schedule on HBO between 2002-2008 in the US, followed by FX and BBC2 in the UK from 2005 and 2009 respectively. Its remaining audience is largely made up of people who watch the show at other times and through other means such as DVD box sets, downloads through BIT Torrent or via streaming sites like Netflix. Supporting this perspective, Sharma (2011) describes the viewing of *The Wire* as taking place within a "'post-television' networked media environment" that the show was able to draw upon and exploit to forge an "emergent form of televisual viewing experience", thus referring to the way that television audiences are produced across different times and places (including those who watch at an original point of broadcast) and through a range of formats and technologies. This further suggests that the way in which meaning is being produced through *The Wire* cannot be explained by a static 'race-based' interpretation of audience positionality that was attributed to consumers of HBO within the commentary outlined above.

Rather than narrowly interpreting the relations of representation in this static way, the narrative and characterisation in *The Wire* may be better understood as being produced through a broader set of relations between social actors (i.e. creators/producers, actors and audience), cultural processes and technologies. When it comes to stereotypes in particular, Pickering (2001: 25- 26) argues, what matters "is how they circulate, and with what consequences, as base coins in the economy of discourse and representation; how they attain their symbolic currency among those involved in their exchange". It is thus important to consider the fragmented nature of television audiences in the contemporary media landscape and the hybrid, multi-textual modes of television viewing and participation (Dasgupta 2010). In addition to the different types of distribution and consumption of *The Wire*, the participatory and interactive dimensions of the 'post-television' networked media environment should be taken into consideration as it enables an immediate global cross-fertilisation of audience and critics' perspectives as they review, exchange and redistribute ideas and information readily across social media and other internet sites. Access to social media across a range of platforms and devices extends the viewing experience by not only providing an immediate space for ordinary viewers and fans to participate in conversations about the television shows they watch (Brooker 2001), but in the process, produce traceable layers of interpretation, praise and negotiated meaning that can also disrupt the idea that normative racialised identities are meant to provide a fixed set of cultural values and tastes that are visible through the relations of representation. Viewers are able to move across cultural codes and evaluate the moral and political puzzles posed by the story and characters. The process of representation therefore can have other layers of meaning and order added prior to, during and after the show has been viewed. Within the 'post-television networked environment', viewers can therefore actively engage across different platforms and take pleasure from different levels of understanding and experience.

Conclusion

Although new racist meanings continue to proliferate through popular culture and that access to mainstream forms of cultural production remains difficult for ethnic minorities, the aim of this article is to ask questions about the representational dynamics of race suggested within published academic and online commentary about *The Wire* by revisiting ideas from Stuart Hall's eponymous essay on new ethnicities and considering the implications of a social constructionist approach to race. Adopting the logic and aspiration of Gilroy (2007), where racial and ethnic differences should be "allowed to become ordinary" and where they should no longer be "burdened either with risk and fear and anxiety, or with exoticism and opportunity and play and desire"; and where they are allowed to just melt down into "the routine substance of social and economic life", I question both the desire for better more authentic depictions of African-American experience and identities and the racial binary that is reproduced through the framing of interpretative relations within dominant responses to *The Wire*. By doing so, I am not dismissing the political need to challenge racism wherever it arises, but I am questioning whether unitary race categories have to be invoked as a resource to do so.

The Wire is noted for its sociological insights, for offering a complex analysis of social issues and within this context it cultivates a credible portrayal of social, economic and political processes that shape outcomes for individuals and groups, particularly those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum; however, on the other hand, it is suggested that the depiction of individuals and communities is not believable, is too negative or is disappointing. Rather than focusing on the authenticity of individual raced-subjects and the extent to which they

'tell it how it really is'; I suggested that examining how morality is configured through narratives and characters offers a better way of evaluating the cultural achievement of the show in terms of race.

The second intractable issue focused on in this paper is the reproduction of a narrow set of viewing positions and that the only possible way that white people can consume or interpret blackness within popular culture is in a voyeuristic manner through either fetishisation or pathologisation of black people. Some of the commentary suggests that those who desire progressive forms of representation and produce this as a dominant reading of the show are also fixed through the same representative relations. The potential for greater diversity within subject and viewing positions in light of the post-television world further undermines the narrow framing of interpretive relations as reducible to raced subjects. I believe *The Wire* affords us an opportunity to consider what it might be like if, following Gilroy (2001), the race card was not played; at least to the extent that race is not reinstated as the price to pay for assessing the value and achievement of a show that tries to offer more complexity than most.

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[1] *The Wire* is a television drama that uses a police investigation of a West Baltimore drugs network to illustrate how the dynamics of social and political institutions (and their failings) create the context for urban decay and social disadvantage. Over the course of five seasons, a complicated, hard-hitting account of life in Baltimore dramatically unfolds. The first season focuses on the police investigation of the drugs in West Baltimore, and from here the story extends beyond the experiences and activities of the police, dealers and drug-users to other inextricable dimensions of Baltimore life throughout the following seasons. From what appears therefore to be a drama focusing on the policing of drug dealing/use and related criminal activity, unfolds a complex story tracing the cultural, educational, financial, legal, political and social dimensions of everyday life for Baltimore's citizens and public officials and the institutions they are operating within.

[2] Home Box Office (HBO) refers to a premium cable and satellite channel that started in the 1970s and is responsible for some of the more recent ground-breaking drama and comedy to emerge from the US receiving widespread critical acclaim.

[3] *The Black and White Minstrel Show* was a British light-entertainment show from 1958-1978. The show typically presented traditional American music hall, minstrel and country songs, but the white performers themselves were 'blacked up' and portrayed black characters in a stereotypically racist way. *Mind Your Language* was a British comedy show that aired from 1977-1979 and was set in an adult education college centring on foreigners taking English language classes. The show was dependant on the reproduction and circulation of stereotypes.

[4] Sudhir Venkatesh for instance sought to examine whether 'real life thugs' believed *The Wire* was authentic by watching episodes of Season 2 with "a group of high ranking gang leaders/drug dealers in Chicago" (Venkatesh,

cited in Dubner 2007) and Season 5 of the show with a number of former criminals (mostly drug-dealers) in New York.

[5] A scene in Season 3, Episode 5 in *The Wire* illustrates how racial stereotypes are deployed and undermined through the narrative, whilst simultaneously highlighting the constructed nature of the idea of race. The scene depicts one of the routine short-cons used by Bubbles and his friend Johnny Weeks to secure money to buy heroin. When choosing the role to play in their con, which involves one of them shaking a ladder upon which a workman is standing whilst the other comes to his rescue by chasing the 'crazed' drug addict away; Bubbles says, "I'll be the bad guy, let's not confuse this white man". Thus, the way to ensure that the con will work is to satisfy stereotypical expectations associated with racial binaries of black and white. Hence, Bubbles plays the threatening character because he is black and the role of the helpful bystander is played by Johnny as he is white. The viewer has the opportunity to observe how racial stereotypes are dispassionately deployed for a specific purpose, whilst at the same time they are reminded of the social constructedness and moral assumptions associated with race categories.

[6] Thanks to Ben Pitcher also for his constructive comments on an earlier draft.